

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Syndicalism and Anarchism

Errico Malatesta

April-May 1925

The relationship between the labour movement and the progressive parties is an old and worn theme. But it is an ever topical one, and so it will remain while there are, on one hand, a mass of people plagued by urgent needs and driven by aspirations — at times passionate but always vague and indeterminate — to a better life, and on the other, individuals and parties who have a specific view of the future and of the means to attain it, but whose plans and hopes are doomed to remain utopias ever out of reach unless they can win over the masses. And the subject is all the more important now that, after the catastrophes of war and of the post-war period, all are preparing, if only mentally, for a resumption of the activity which must follow upon the fall of the tyrannies that still rant and rage [across Europe] but are beginning to tremble.

For this reason I shall try to clarify what, in my view, should be the anarchists' attitude to labour organisations.

Today, I believe, there is no-one, or almost no-one amongst us who would deny the usefulness of and the need for the labour movement as a mass means of material and moral advancement, as a fertile ground for propaganda and as an indispensable force for the social transformation that is our goal.

Errico Malatesta
Syndicalism and Anarchism
April-May 1925

The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924–1931, edited
and introduced by Vernon Richards. Published by Freedom
Press London 1995.

theanarchistlibrary.org

There is no longer anyone who does not understand what the workers' organisation means, to us anarchists more than to anyone, believing as we do that the new social organisation must not and cannot be imposed by a new government by force but must result from the free cooperation of all. Moreover, the labour movement is now an important and universal institution. To oppose it would be to become the oppressors' accomplices; to ignore it would be to put us out of reach of people's everyday lives and condemn us to perpetual powerlessness.

Yet, while everyone, or almost everyone, is in agreement on the usefulness and the need for the anarchists to take an active part in the labour movement and to be its supporters and promoters, we often disagree among ourselves on the methods, conditions and limitations of such involvement.

Many comrades would like the labour movement and anarchist movement to be one and the same thing and, where they are able — for instance, in Spain and Argentina, and even to a certain extent in Italy, France, Germany, etc. — try to confer on the workers' organisations a clearly anarchist programme. These comrades are known as 'anarcho-syndicalists,' or, if they get mixed up with others who really are not anarchists, call themselves 'revolutionary syndicalists'.

There needs to be some explanation of the meaning of 'syndicalism.'

If it is a question of what one wants from the future, if, that is, by syndicalism is meant the form of social organisation that should replace capitalism and state organisation, then either it is the same thing as anarchy and is therefore a word that serves only to confuse; or it is something different from anarchy and cannot therefore be accepted by anarchists. In fact, among the ideas and the proposals on the future which some syndicalists have put forward, there are some that are genuinely anarchist. But there are others which, under other names and other forms, reproduce the authoritarian structure which underlies

within a capitalist society and to drive the struggle on toward ever more radical solutions.

The anarchists within the unions should strive to ensure that they remain open to all workers of whatever opinion or party on the sole condition that there is solidarity in the struggle against the bosses. They should oppose the corporatist spirit and any attempt to monopolise labour or organisation. They should prevent the Unions from becoming the tools of the politicians for electoral or other authoritarian ends; they should preach and practice direct action, decentralisation, autonomy and free initiative. They should strive to help members learn how to participate directly in the life of the organisation and to do without leaders and permanent officials.

They must, in short, remain anarchists, remain always in close touch with anarchists and remember that the workers' organisation is not the end but just one of the means, however important, of preparing the way for the achievement of anarchism.

the cause of the ills about which we are now protesting, and which, therefore, have nothing to do with anarchy.

But it is not syndicalism as a social system which I mean to deal with, because it is not this which can determine the current actions of the anarchists with regard to the labour movement.

I am dealing here with the labour movement under a capitalist and state regime and the name syndicalism includes all the workers' organisations, all the various unions set up to resist the oppression of the bosses and to lessen or altogether wipe out the exploitation of human labour by the owners of the raw materials and means of production.

Now I say that these organisations cannot be anarchist and that it does no good to claim that they are, because if they were they would be failing in their purpose and would not serve the ends that those anarchists who are involved in them propose.

A Union is set up to defend the day to day interests of the workers and to improve their conditions as much as possible before they can be in any position to make the revolution and by it change today's wage-earners into free workers, freely associating for the benefit of all.

For a union to serve its own ends and at the same time act as a means of education and ground for propaganda aimed at radical social change, it needs to gather together all workers — or at least those workers who look to an improvement of their conditions — and to be able to put up some resistance to the bosses. Can it possibly wait for all the workers to become anarchists before inviting them to organise themselves and before admitting them into the organisation, thereby reversing the natural order of propaganda and psychological development and forming the resistance organisation when there is no longer any need, since the masses would already be capable of making the revolution? In such a case the union would be a duplicate of the anarchist grouping and would be powerless either to obtain improvements or to make revolution. Or would it content itself

with committing the anarchist programme to paper and with formal, unthought-out support, and bringing together people who, sheeplike, follow the organisers, only then to scatter and pass over to the enemy on the first occasion they are called upon to show themselves to be serious anarchists?

Syndicalism (by which I mean the practical variety and not the theoretical sort, which everyone tailors to their own shape) is by nature reformist. All that can be expected of it is that the reforms it fights for and achieves are of a kind and obtained in such a way that they serve revolutionary education and propaganda and leave the way open for the making of ever greater demands.

Any fusion or confusion between the anarchist and revolutionary movement and the syndicalist movement ends either by rendering the union helpless as regards its specific aims or with toning down, falsifying and extinguishing the anarchist spirit.

A union can spring up with a socialist, revolutionary or anarchist programme and it is, indeed, with programmes of this sort that the various workers' programmes originate. But it is while they are weak and impotent that they are faithful to the programme — while, that is, they remain propaganda groups set up and by a few zealous and committed men, rather than organisations ready for effective action. Later, as they manage to attract the masses and acquire the strength to claim and impose improvements, the original programme becomes an empty formula, to which no-one pays any more attention. Tactics adapt to the needs of the moment and the enthusiasts of the early days either themselves adapt or cede their place to 'practical' men concerned with today, and with no thought for tomorrow.

There are, of course, comrades who, though in the first ranks of the union movement, remain sincerely and enthusiastically anarchist, as there are workers' groupings inspired by anarchist ideas. But it would be too easy a work of criticism to seek

out the thousands of cases in which, in everyday practice, these men and these groupings contradict anarchist ideas.

Hard necessity? I agree. Pure anarchism cannot be a practical solution while people are forced to deal with bosses and with authority. The: mass of the people cannot be left to their own devices when they refuse to do so and ask for, demand, leaders. But why confuse anarchism with what anarchism is not and take upon ourselves, as anarchists, responsibility for the various transactions and agreements that need to be made on the very grounds that the masses are not anarchist, even where they belong to an organisation that has written an anarchist programme into its constitution?

In my opinion the anarchists should not want the unions to be anarchist. The anarchists must work among themselves for anarchist ends, as individuals, groups and federations of groups. In the same way as there are, or should be, study and discussion groups, groups for written or spoken propaganda in public, cooperative groups, groups working within factories and workshops, fields, barracks, schools, etc., so they should form groups within the various organisations that wage class war.

Naturally the ideal would be for everyone to be anarchist and for all organisations to work anarchically. But it is clear that if that were the case, there would be no need to organise for the struggle against the bosses, because the bosses would no longer exist. In present circumstances, given the degree of development of the mass of the people amongst which they work, the anarchist groups should not demand that these organisations be anarchist, but try to draw them as close as possible to anarchist tactics. If the survival of the organisation and the needs and wishes of the organised make it really necessary to compromise and enter into muddled negotiations with authority and the employers, so be it. But let it be the responsibility of others, not the anarchists, whose mission is to point to the inadequacy and fragility of all improvements that are made